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UNCLAS MUSCAT 000819

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD, NEA/P, IIP/G/NEA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KPAO SOCI MU

SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: THE QURAN, THE COLLEGE, AND THE COPS

REF: MUSCAT 764 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. Summary: The Omani Internet chat rooms "al-Sablah" and "al-Majarra" are the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language fora for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, these popular sites nevertheless offer a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- Discussions of the alleged Quran desecration
-- Rumors about the College of Sharia and Law
-- Advice for those under investigation

End summary.

Before The Retraction

¶2. Nearly one hundred al-Sablah members weighed in on the allegations that U.S. military interrogators defiled a Quran at the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay. Anger characterized nearly all the responses. One individual wrote, "What more do we expect from the enemies of Islam, who tear the Quran and burn and destroy our mosques?" Another declared fervently, "God preserve the Quran, and destroy the Americans who express, by their actions, their animosity towards Islam and Muslims!" Many felt that the Islamic countries had not done enough to counter the alleged desecration; one writer questioned, "Where is the Islamic ummah [nation]? The Holy Book is desecrated and nobody does anything!" Another suggested, "Islamic countries must unify to stop the desecration of our shrines and sanctuaries."

¶3. Emotions such as sadness and suspicion likewise rippled through the Internet message board. One of the more poetic members observed, "The Quran, the sacred book that enlightens us, raises our spirits and gives us joy when reciting its verses, is desecrated! The defilers pretend to be enlightened, but they are ignorant of civilization and do not respect other religions." Still others viewed the U.S. response with skepticism: "The American 'investigation' is a mere lie, because they supervised the desecration in the first place."

School's Out?

¶4. A rumor surfaced in al-Sablah that "Muscat's College of Sharia and Law will be shut down, and instead a new law school will be established at Sultan Qaboos University." This rumor prompted many readers to wonder about the underlying reasons. "Maybe the recent arrests have made the government reorganize their strategy towards Islamic education," and "Perhaps this is a way of tamping down the rise of Islamist tendencies in Oman" were two common speculations. Other members worried about the academic consequences of such a development: "Will the students be allowed to finish the semester?"

Community Service Announcements

¶5. No doubt inspired by the recent arrests (reftel), a number of al-Sablah writers have dispensed advice about the Royal Oman Police's investigative techniques. One writer warned, "Be aware that the investigators will try to trap you, and make you confess to a crime you did not commit." Another offered, "The investigator will ask you to sign two documents: one states you will not reveal the content of the investigation, and the other authorizes the continuance of the investigation. However, the small print at the bottom of one document reads, 'I confess to being involved in secret organizations.'"

BALTIMORE